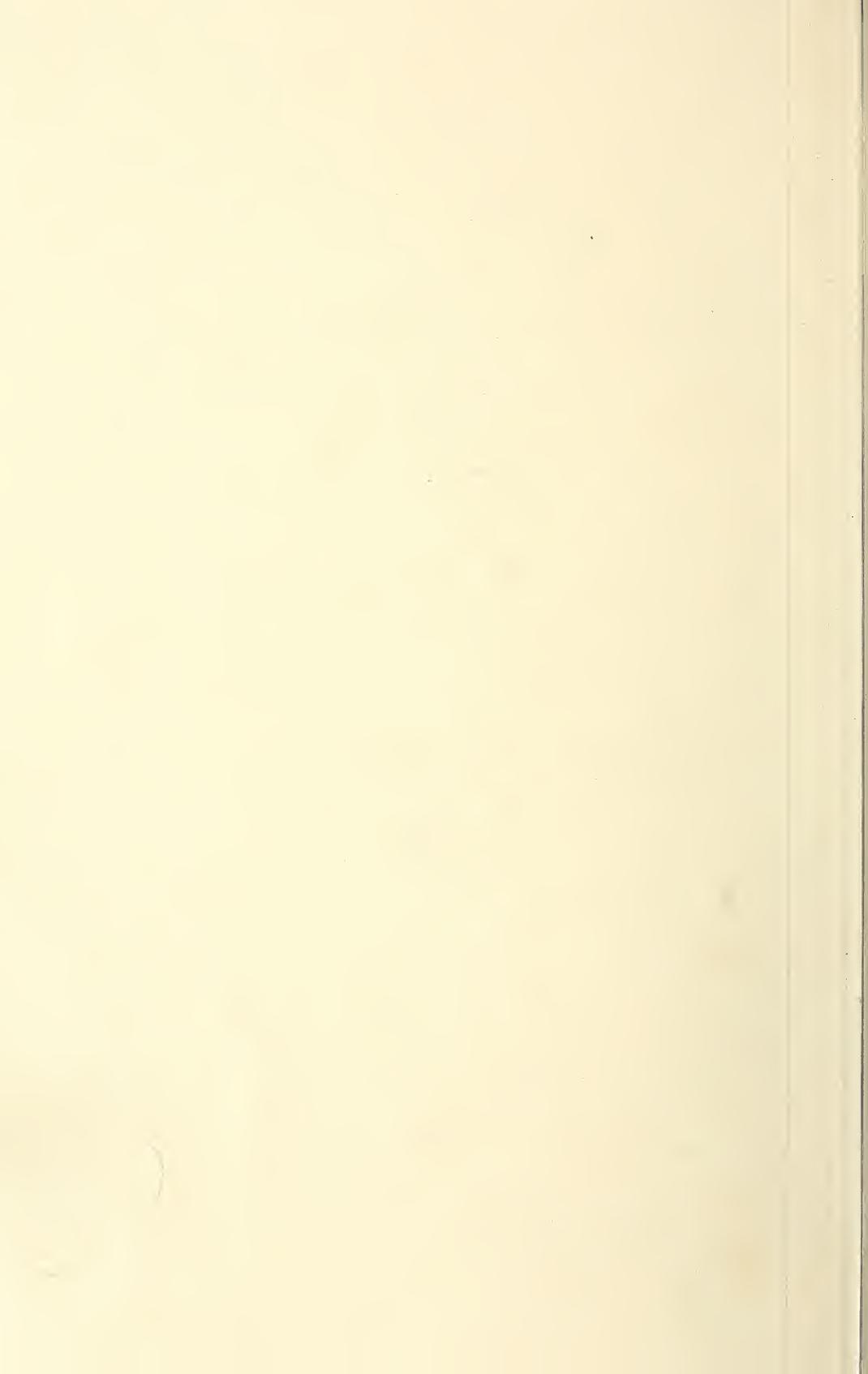


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soil conservation: WHO GAINS BY IT?



This pamphlet has been especially prepared for use by discussion groups. Its purpose is to present, in brief form, some of the main facts on erosion and soil conservation, and some current viewpoints on soil conservation programs. No statement contained herein should be taken as an official expression by the Department of Agriculture.

The following questions are discussed:

- How Much Erosion Has Taken Place?
- Who Has Made Money on Erosion?
- Who Has Lost Money on Erosion?
- How Much Has Soil Conservation Accomplished?
- Do Soil Conservation Programs Concern Good Farmers?
- How Do Soil Conservation Programs Affect Consumers?
- How Much Should the Government Do to Help Balance Agriculture?
- Can Farmers Control Production Individually?
- Are Farmers Growing the Right Food for City People?
- What Should Be Done with Farm Surpluses?

Copies of this pamphlet may be obtained free upon request addressed to the Extension Service, United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C. Other pamphlets have been similarly prepared and are similarly obtainable.

SUBJECT-MATTER PAMPHLETS FOR THE 1936-37 SEASON

- DS-1 What Should Be the Farmers' Share in the National Income?
- DS-2 How Do Farm People Live in Comparison with City People?
- DS-3 Should Farm Ownership Be a Goal of Agricultural Policy?
- DS-4 Exports and Imports—How Do They Affect the Farmer?
- DS-5 Is Increased Efficiency in Farming Always a Good Thing?
- DS-6 What Should Farmers Aim to Accomplish Through Organization?
- DS-7 What Kind of Agricultural Policy Is Necessary to Save Our Soil?
- DS-8 What Part Should Farmers in Your County Take in Making National Agricultural Policy?

SUBJECT-MATTER PAMPHLETS FOR THE 1937-38 SEASON

- DS- 9 Taxes: Who Pays, What For?
- DS-10 Rural Communities: What Do They Need Most?
- DS-11 Soil Conservation: Who Gains By It?
- DS-12 Co-ops: How Much Can They Help?
- DS-13 Farm Finance: What Is a Sound System?
- DS-14 Crop Insurance: Is It Practical?
- DS-15 Reciprocal Trade Agreements: Hurting or Helping the Country?
- DS-16 Farm Security: How Can Tenants Find It?

PAMPHLETS ON THE DISCUSSION METHOD

- D-3 What Is the Discussion Leader's Job?

United States Department of Agriculture

The Extension Service and the

Agricultural Adjustment Administration Cooperating

(Photographs by Farm Security Administration and Soil Conservation Service)

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SOIL CONSERVATION: WHO GAINS BY IT?

What do we mean when we say soil conservation? Some people mean stopping soil erosion. They mean keeping the soil where it is, keeping gullies from forming and growing larger, halting wind erosion, or checking the run-off of water; they even advocate, in extreme cases, changing the use of the land from cultivation to grazing, forestry, or recreation.

To other people, soil conservation means stopping soil depletion or leaching, and restoring or building up fertility. They call attention to the fact that crops may deplete the soil by extracting valuable elements. They say that while the best soil of some farms may be carried off by wind or water, the readily available plant food in the best soil of others is carried off by the farmers' own trucks in the form of shipments of wheat or potatoes. To them, soil conservation means restoring the elements that past crops have taken out, and planning future farming to cause less wear and tear on the farm.

Still other people say, "It's not a case of either-or, but a case of both-and. Erosion is perhaps the greatest cause of loss of soil fertility, and loss of soil fertility is a big factor in causing erosion. What is done to prevent erosion conserves not only the body of the soil but its fertility, and conservation of fertility protects soil against erosion."

A similar variety of answers is likely to appear when the question is asked, "But how can soil be conserved?" This question brings up the problem of specific methods. Some people answer it in terms of farm practices. They say, here is the way to stop gullies; here is the way to keep little waters from turning into big floods; here is the way to farm your land so as not to give away some of your capital every time you sell some of your produce.

Others agree that knowledge of proper methods is important; they agree with the people who think improved

farm practices will solve the problem; but they are asking, "How's the farmer going to pay for all this?" They say, "Certainly, this farm needs lime; certainly, that range is overgrazed; certainly, that hill is too steep to plant in row crops, but what are you going to do about it—the family that's living there has to live, doesn't it?" The people who hold this view see soil conservation as a problem in farm prices and income. They point out that when farm prices are too low, farmers are forced to attempt to increase their income by increasing the quantity of their product for sale, and the outlook for effective, Nation-wide soil conservation gets very slim.

Those who emphasize the income side of soil conservation are likely to start an argument. Somebody is sure to reply that when prices are high, farmers push their land for all it will produce, so as to sell the greatest possible amount before the price declines. While too little income may keep some farmers from doing right by their land, lots of other farmers don't conserve their soil even when they have plenty of money. "Speculators will be speculators," they say, "and not all speculators live in the cities."

That brings up the question of who gains by soil conservation and who gains by soil erosion.

HOW MUCH EROSION HAS TAKEN PLACE?

The facts on soil erosion are pretty clear. Mostly within the past 100 years, 50,000,000 once-fertile acres have been permanently ruined as productive land. Another 50,000,000 once-fertile acres are seriously damaged. And in addition, there are now in cultivation 100,000,000 acres impaired by erosion, and another 100,000,000 acres on which erosion is well started. In dollars, this loss has been estimated at \$400,000,000 per year.

The land permanently ruined and seriously damaged by erosion represents an area larger than all the farm land in Pennsylvania, Illinois, Iowa, and Oregon. If this soil destruction had occurred only in these States, visitors could

now travel through the spectacular wastes of these four States and see what happens when farmers do not guard their soil.

There would be scenically magnificent gullies, hundreds of feet deep. Much of the territory would be rocks, for the topsoil would have been washed and blown away, leaving only exposed stone. Or there would be frequent dust storms of such intensity that inhabitants of the neighboring States might be forced to move.

These are pretty big losses. But has no one gained by farming intensively with no thought for the future? Weren't there some people who made money by the very process of wasting the Nation's soil? If some people made money, did others lose? Who were they?

When people get into a discussion of this question, a good many interests present themselves for consideration. There are the interests of the producers who sell farm commodities. There are the interests of the consumers who buy farm commodities. Then, too, the matter of short-run and long-run interests is important: Are there not instances when the short-run interests of both producers and consumers differ from their long-run interests?

WHO HAS MADE MONEY ON EROSION?

Take the case of a farmer who comes into a community, buys a farm, skins it, and sells out. Plenty of farmers have made a good bit of money that way and retired to a pleasant old age in California or Florida.

Take the case of the speculator who buys up a lot of farms, gets them farmed any way he can for a few years while land prices are rising, and sells at a big advance. Plenty of American fortunes have been made in real estate.

Take the case of a tenant who has no stake in the land and no way of knowing if he can renew his lease. He aims to get all he can out of the land this year; next year can take care of itself. That process has been worth while to a good many tenants.

But after the transient owner, the speculator, and the tenant have moved on, what about the land they left behind them? Time was, when a piece of land could be used up and deserted and there was always more good farm land to the West for anybody who had the energy to farm it. But that is no longer true today. Our 362,941,000 acres of cropland include not only most of the good land, but a lot of land that's not so good because of the way previous farmers have farmed it.

WHO HAS LOST MONEY ON EROSION?

Later operators of such land have lost because of speculative prices when they take over. They have lost because of the high cost, in energy and materials, of raising products on partly exhausted soil. They have lost through lowered resistance to drought because of scanty pasture. From the point of view of the interest of the producer, there seems to be quite a difference between long-run and short-run interests.

From the point of view of the interest of the consumer, similar differences are noticeable. When food prices are low, consumers who have incomes get a lot for their money. At various times consumers have split the profits of skinning the soil with the farmers who did the skinning. But after skinning has gone on for a while, consumers and farmers share alike the losses that follow poor farming methods. Then too, after a period of low farm prices, fewer city consumers have incomes, and many city incomes are lower because farmers are buying less of the goods that city people produce. So the short-run and the long-run interests of consumers seem to differ as far as soil conservation is concerned.

In the light of preceding statements would you agree that the short-run interests of both farmers and consumers are in harmony and destructive, while the long-run interests of both farmers and consumers are also in harmony, and support conservation?



HOW MUCH HAS SOIL CONSERVATION ACCOMPLISHED?

Ever since the settlement of the country, some farmers have had the knowledge, the energy, and the capital necessary to follow soil conserving practices on their farms. The acres that have been farmed for many years, and even generations, and are fertile and productive today, are a tribute to their management. Over a long period, the agricultural colleges of the various States and the United States Department of Agriculture have assisted farmers by carrying on research and teaching good farm practices. In recent years, Federal programs have attacked the problem of soil conservation from two angles. The Soil Conservation Service is maintaining demonstration areas at 450 points across the country covering a total area of 17,867,822 acres where improved methods are put into practice. In the course of the current year, almost half the States have adopted legislation so that farmers who wish to organize for the application of soil conserving methods to the area in their neighborhoods can set up soil conservation districts with officers exercising certain gov-

ernmental powers to see that proper practices are carried out. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration, under the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, has encouraged farmers to shift from soil-depleting to soil-conserving crops, and to restore fertility by a variety of practices, with the aid of benefit payments to help defray the costs.

In your opinion, how great is the interest of the nation as a whole in the use of its farm lands? In the source of its food supply? Is it sufficient to warrant national programs of soil conservation? If so, what form should such programs take?

In thinking about these questions, let's look in on some people talking about this very matter:

SOME OPINIONS ON SOIL CONSERVATION

In the yard of a rural consolidated school, the annual picnic of the school association was getting under way. The women were inside, busily unpacking baskets. The children shouted from the swings at the far end of the building. Some of the men were leaning against the long open shed, where the boys and girls who rode their ponies and horses to school usually hitched them during the day. Four were pitching horse shoes. Nearby, a group was talking about soil conservation.

Uncle Jimmy Brown, one of the old-timers, who had been farming successfully in the township for almost 50 years, was arguing with three other men.

"I don't see why I should get worried about it," he declared, and then interrupted himself to say, "Two of them." He pointed to the second "ringer."

"Now, Uncle Jimmy, don't try to get off the subject!" advised his nephew, Harold Brown, who had farmed his father's place since Mr. Brown died 6 years ago. "Why shouldn't you get worried about erosion, and bad farming, and ruined land?"

DO SOIL CONSERVATION PROGRAMS CONCERN GOOD FARMERS?

"Well, I don't have any ruined land myself, and I'm not a bad farmer," Uncle Jimmy said. "I've been farming here pretty near 50 years now, if you count the years I helped my daddy, and I can still raise crops, and good ones too, on my 320 acres. I don't need anybody telling me how to farm!"

"I know you're not a bad farmer. You're a good one," replied his nephew. "But there are lots of farmers who haven't even thought about what erosion and poor farming are doing to our farm land. Why it's already ruined a lot of it!"

"Sure. Just take a look at that farm of John Larsen's I bought from his widow 3 years ago," Harvey Graham, one of the younger men, chipped in. "Of course, I got it cheap, but there are more thin spots where I can't raise anything than I knew before I bought it. I had to move the barn 20 feet away from a gully or it sure would have tumbled in some night when a hard rain came along!"

"That's a good example of what happens when farmers don't take care of their soil," Harold Brown pointed out. "Larsen used to have a good farm, but he used it so hard without doing a thing for the land, that Harvey is having to put in ten times the work to get it back into shape."

"Well, why shouldn't he do what he wanted to with it?" asked Uncle Jimmy. "It was his own farm, wasn't it?"

"Sure," Harold Brown agreed. "But my father kept up his land because he knew I'd be farming it some day."

"Well, Larsen's two sons went to the city and got jobs, and they didn't want to keep the farm. And John sure made money out of it while he could."

"He certainly did, Uncle Jimmy," Harold said, "but his wife lost out when she sold it."

"And me, too," added Harvey. "I've got to work like a dog to make it a good farm."

HOW DO SOIL CONSERVATION PROGRAMS AFFECT CONSUMERS?

"What good does a soil conservation program do me?" asked Ned Rogers, a visiting cousin of Harvey's from the city. "I buy all my food in grocery stores. All I can see it does is to give the tax money I pay over to the farmer so he won't have to work so hard."

"Yes; that's it," said Uncle Jimmy. "Why should I pay taxes out of what I make on my farm to support shiftless, lazy farmers?"

"Yea. And the Government is just playing politics paying out all this money," Rogers insisted. "The city fellow sure pays and pays. He pays taxes so the Government can give money to the farmers, so the farmer can charge bigger prices, so the city worker has to pay higher prices for food. We get it all the way around!"

"Do you, though?" queried Harold. "What about the tariff walls that shelter you city folks and hold up the prices on most of the things we farmers buy?"

Uncle Jimmy was not to be diverted. "You wait and see if the county committeemen carrying on these programs don't get into politics," he predicted.

"Well, we have a chance to elect them, haven't we?" his nephew asked. "We have a chance to keep county conservation committees out of politics if we want to."

"Well, it looks to me like a farmer ought to conserve his own land without a lot of help and interference," Uncle Jimmy observed. "If he doesn't, he'll get into trouble sooner or later."

"Well, during the droughts lots of farmers got into trouble right away when they couldn't even raise enough feed to keep their livestock," said Graham. "I know I was like that, because John Smith had plowed up his pastures to plant them all to corn, and since I've had the farm I've had to try and get pastures started during times when there hasn't been enough rainfall."

"Uncle Jimmy, you have always kept that 60 acres across the road from the house in pasture, haven't you?" asked his nephew.

"Sure, and so did my daddy before me. That pasture is the real prairie. It never has been plowed."

"And you kept ten cows on it all during the drought, too, didn't you?"

"That's right, and the money from the cream sure helped out," Uncle Jimmy agreed.

"Well," Harold Brown turned to Rogers, "didn't you folks in the city have to pay a lot more for butter during the drought?"

"I'll say we did. And we didn't like it either."

"There's a case where if farming was better balanced, so many farms wouldn't be like Harvey's with no pastures on them, and Harvey could have kept cows and some livestock. If Harvey had been able to do that, along with lots of other farmers, butter prices wouldn't have gone so high," Harold suggested. "This soil conservation program is aimed to help balance agriculture."

HOW MUCH SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT DO TO HELP BALANCE AGRICULTURE?

"Oh, you want the Government to do everything for you," Uncle Jimmy got impatient. "Why don't you have the Government buy a farm for you and build a big expensive house, like it's doing for lots of people now?"

"That's not true, Uncle Jimmy," Harvey declared. "You know what they did for Henry Black over to Oneida, don't you? They helped him, but didn't just give him everything, and in these last 3 years he's got pretty well straightened out."

"I've read in the papers about moving farmers to swell farms," Ned Rogers said, "And giving them money to sit around on the places I helped pay for. Why don't they buy the farms themselves?"

"Well, they do," replied Harold Brown. "Farmers are given loans, sometimes, to save their farms. Or maybe to buy new farms. But those loans are not hand-outs, and the record of paying back is mighty good."



"But you haven't told me yet why I should get excited about erosion and conservation," Uncle Jimmy returned to his original point. "What does it have to do with me?"

"Well, how'd you like to live in a county all full of ruined farms like the one I bought," inquired Graham. "How'd you like to have that gully I told you about, that was by my barn, running right alongside your farm? It'd grow in no time to be eating up your farm too."

"And look what the row crops that start the gullies do to prices," added Harold Brown.

CAN FARMERS CONTROL PRODUCTION INDIVIDUALLY?

"Well, a farmer ought to be smart enough to decide that if the price of wheat is going down, he ought to plant less wheat, and more of something else—maybe give some of his fields a rest," declared Uncle Jimmy. "I know in 1931 when I hadn't gotten enough to pay me out of my wheat crop, I sure didn't plant much the next year. Why the whole county was full of wheat and we couldn't ship much of any to foreign countries. I planted alfalfa and clover and other legumes on a good share of my farm."

"Well, that's fine," Ned went on, "but you could afford to wait for that alfalfa to get started. Lots of farmers can't stop producing row crops when they aren't getting good prices. They got to eat, that means they got to have something to sell this year."

ARE FARMERS GROWING THE RIGHT FOOD FOR CITY PEOPLE?

"After all," Rogers aimed the question at his cousin, "Why don't you farmers raise more of the crops that city people don't have enough of now? I read the other day that if Americans had a proper diet of vegetables and truck crops, the present acreage would have to be increased about 200 percent. Why don't you farmers switch to crops that we need, instead of raising too much of something else?"

"That's a lot easier said than done," Harold replied, "though farmers are trying to diversify their farming more

and more. Everybody knows there're lots of people not getting enough milk and butter now, and that applies to farm folks just as much as anyone else."

"But putting the price up doesn't buy more butter for people," Rogers came back. "Why don't you keep butter at a reasonable price?"

"Well, if all farming were more regular it would help food prices," Harold met him, "And that's where soil conservation helps."

"Just like I heard over the radio the other night," said Harvey Graham, in support. "The man said that 'soil conservation is an effort to build and maintain a better balanced system of farming, more profitable to farmers, and safer for consumers.'"

"Yes, but the better your soil gets, the more you'll be able to raise per acre," Uncle Jimmy pointed out. "The Government first told farmers they'd better cut down production so they could get fair prices, and now they tell them to build up their soil so they can raise more. And so far as that goes, it seems to me like a good idea to take advantage of high prices. When prices are high or look like they're going to be high, I plant all the wheat I can."

"And then you have too much, and the price goes down," Harold Brown continued the story. "Why not keep production and price somewhat regular?"

While he was speaking, Helen Jones, Ned Jones' wife, had come out to the group.

"I came out to tell you folks you'd better come in and get something to eat," she said. "And I heard what you said about keeping prices regular. But I don't think it can be done. My goodness, I pay one price for butter one Saturday and another price the next Saturday!"

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE WITH FARM SURPLUSES?

"I don't see why somebody doesn't do something about getting some foreign countries to buy our wheat and cotton," Uncle Jimmy complained, changing the subject. "We used to send a big share of our wheat and cotton to other countries."

"Well, that's because foreign countries are trying to raise their own now," his nephew offered an explanation. "They're trying to be 'self-sufficient' because they're so afraid there'll be wars and they'll need the food and fiber. But our trade agreement program is trying to get tariffs down so we can send our products out."

"One of the things I like that they're doing now," Mrs. Jones chipped in, "is buying up surpluses and storing them for times like the big floods, or sending food to drought-stricken people, or using it for people who don't have enough to eat. I think that's a good idea."

"But that keeps up the prices of food sold on the regular market," Ned objected to his wife.

"Well, if you men want some good food now, you'd better come on in," his wife told him.

And, still discussing agricultural problems, the group started toward the school auditorium.

What do you think of the points made by this group in its discussion of soil conservation?

Do you think that what a man does with his farm is his own business and nobody else's?

Do you think that the community, through the Government, should offer farmers:

- (a) Information on scientific ways to prevent blowing, washing, and leaching of their soil?
- (b) Benefit payments for following improved practices?
- (c) Powers to set up a soil conservation district in their neighborhood and vote legally enforceable regulations on themselves?

Do you think that consumers should:

- (a) Use their influence to keep prices for food as low as possible?
- (b) Take a part in insuring stable supplies of farm products?

How can producers and consumers of farm commodities best be helped to realize their mutual long-term interest in conservation?

MORE ABOUT SOIL CONSERVATION

(Quantity prices may be secured on many of these publications)

For further bibliography prior to 1936 as well as further discussion of the issues involved in a program for soil conservation, see "What Kind of an Agricultural Policy Is Necessary to Save Our Soil?" DS-7. Obtainable free through the Extension Service, United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.

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CONSUMER'S GUIDE. Issued every two weeks by the Consumers' Counsel, A. A. A. U. S. Department of Agriculture, Washington. Free.

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SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST. Farmers' Bulletin 1773. Superintendent of Documents, Washington. 1937. \$0.10.

AAA CONSERVATION GUIDE FOR WOMEN. Western Region Leaflet No. 104. Agricultural Adjustment Administration, Washington, D. C. 1937. Free.

SOIL DEFENSE IN THE Piedmont. Farmers' Bulletin 1767. Superintendent of Documents, Washington. 1937. \$0.15.

TOPSOIL: ITS PRESERVATION. Soil Conservation Service, Region Five. Superintendent of Documents, Washington. 1937. \$0.10.

SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION IN THE NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS. Soil Conservation Service, Region Nine. Superintendent of Documents, Washington. 1937. \$0.10.

ANCHORING FARMLANDS IN THE OHIO VALLEY REGION. Soil Conservation Service, Region Three. U. S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C. 1937. Free.

OUR SOIL: ITS WASTAGE, ITS PRESERVATION. Soil Conservation Service, Region Seven, Salina, Kansas. 1937. Free.